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Testimony of Douglas Gibson, MD

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In support of revised HB 7155,

An Act Concerning a Health Care Providers Health Program

Public Health Committee

March 14, 2007

Senator Handley, Representative Sayers and members of the Public Health Committee I am Douglas Gibson, MD, medical director of the Connecticut State Medical Society Physician Health Program. On behalf of the Physician Health Program as well the Coalition of Health Care Professionals, I thank you for the opportunity to present this testimony to you today in support of House Bill 7155 An Act Concerning a Professional Assistance Program for Health care Professionals. I support the revised language that has been submitted by the Commissioner of the Department of Public Health (DPH) for House Bill 7155. A copy of the revised language is attached.

The members of the committee have heard the statistics regarding the prevalence of health care providers who might suffer the affliction of chemical dependency during their practice lifetime. Many of us deal with this on a daily basis. I have been involved with physician health matters for over a decade. Over the last two years, my involvement with the other health care professionals suffering from chemical dependency has intensified. I have counseled physician assistants, nurses, dentists and veterinarians, many desperately seeking help. In sharp distinction with physicians, who have the benefit of a confidential program, very few of these health care professionals were self-reported and too many were referred by colleagues only after they were far along the path of addiction. There was no formal assistance program available to them, making their intervention and recovery much more difficult. More importantly, there was neither a formal program to monitor their recovery, nor to monitor their ability to practice with skill and safety. Without a program, their relapse rate was high and their professional skills were eventually compromised. Many continued along the destructive path of addiction, not only

putting themselves in harms way, but also the patients they served. Only a small percent of these individuals came to the attention of the Department of Public Health or Licensing Boards. Our nurses have been without a program for far too long. We have a critical nursing shortage and have lost some of our best nurses to chemical dependency. They deserve better. All of our healthcare professionals deserve better. Most importantly, our patients deserve better. We must act now. The revised language in H.B. 7155 will allow us to create an effective and successful program.

Why will it be so successful? It would be structured to encourage self referral as well as early referral from colleagues. We have learned from the Physician Health Program that self referrals happen **ONLY** when confidentiality is insured. **CONFIDENTIALITY IS THE KEY**, followed by compassionate-intervention, prompt assistance and a treatment program founded on evidence based medicine and delivered by those skilled in treating chemical dependency and mental illness. The participants must strictly adhere to the program and at all times demonstrate the ability to practice with skill and safety. Any deviation means automatic referral to the Department of Public Health or the Licensing Boards. **ACCOUNTABILITY IS ALSO KEY**, assuring quality and confidence. Education about chemical dependency and co-morbid illnesses is the foundation for understanding and compassion.

The various healthcare associations must pool their resources in establishing this comprehensive rehabilitation and monitoring program, utilizing the skills of those trained in chemical dependency and mental illnesses.

The language that is provided to you regarding revised H. B. 7155 will allow us to do so.

Additionally, I want to express my sincere gratitude to Dr. Galvin and his staff for working with us to achieve these important initiatives.

Thank you